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Why Singalong? The meanings and uses of the singalong chorus in First World war music hall.

## Intro

One useful way of understanding the social history of popular music is to look at the social activities which particular genres of popular music make popular or necessary. The gradual rise of the dance halls from 1900 to 1960 transformed urban courtship with their waltzes, foxtrots and excuse-me dances. Skiffle in the 1950s or Punk in the 1970s incited young people, mostly men, to form bands in their thousands. The folk revival from the 1950s on encouraged the formation of hundreds of folk clubs, with their particular aesthetic of low-tech concerts, amateur enthusiasm and real ale.

What, then, of music hall, the dominant form of paid musical experience in the years of the First World War, selling a million tickets a week in London alone?

Singalong was the key activity associated with this entertainment genre.

The experience of group singing of a refrain was so central to the music hall experience that the songs were often referred to by non music-hall people simply as “chorus songs”.<sup>1</sup> However, the exact contours of this kind of performance have been little studied, and such study is hindered by

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<sup>1</sup> Lena Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*. Copenhagen: Gyldenal, 1922, p. 19.

the fact that all recordings of the time are studio recordings, where audience singalong is almost never heard.

## 1 Singalong as a practical necessity and constraint

Singalong had a number of practical advantages from the point of view of the artiste. One of its main strengths was the possibility of bringing more volume into the performance. The variety theatres were large, The Paisley Hippodrome had 1400 seats, the Empire in Preston and the New Hippodrome in Folkestone had 3 000 each. The Bradford Alhambra opened in 1914 with 1400 seats. Yet microphones are not seen on the stage until the very end of the nineteen twenties. Singalong could help then ensure volume.

From the artiste's point of view, singalong was also encouraged by the immediate performance context. It was necessary to get one's audience's attention, since the turn was only fifteen minutes long. The audience had not generally come out to see a single chosen singer, but for a whole evening of very varied entertainment. Perhaps they had just seen an

elephant act, acrobats or the “motoring ventriloquist” and were looking forward to watching comedian “Elsie Croos, the original silly Yorkshire tomboy” or “Kirk and Saraski, the girl aquatic marvels”. And the singer had to maintain the attention of the audience in an atmosphere which included plenty of heckling and “the too aggressive hawking of chocolates”.

The performer’s ability to get the audience to sing along was touted to the theatre managers who were drawing up contracts. In 1913 for example, an advert in the trade press proclaimed: “One touch of Harry Anderson, the London vocalist, makes the audience sing”

But singalong also imposed constraints on the artiste and songwriter. The tunes had to be easy to follow, easy to take up. Musical innovation was not appropriate. This requirement of singalong made however little difference, because other factors outlawed excessive musical innovation. The artiste came to a new town each week and the house orchestra had to learn the music of their songs on Monday morning in time for first house Monday evening.

Above all, singalong ensured the collective and bodily involvement of one’s audience. From the audience’s point of view, singing together is a far more engrossing experience, using more of the senses than simply listening to the performer. It is also a more communal experience: one is singing alongside friends or family one came for a night out with, and this in a time of – in many cases -

concentrated residential communities around factories or mines. You might know by sight a considerable proportion of the audience. The music hall was so much part of the community that in some Lancashire factories workers sent a delegation to the hall every Monday night to see how good the show was and recommend, or not, that precious sixpences be spent on tickets.

The singalong experience was affected, too, by the relative rarity of musical experience. There was of course no radio, television, MP3s or youtube, no supermarket music or video game music. Gramophones were restricted to a small moneyed or geekish minority. For the price of the cheapest gramophone in 1916 you could buy two hundred cheap tickets for the music hall. So, despite the three million pianos in Britain at the beginning of war, the street singers and the pub singalongs, people heard incalculably less music than today, which made the music they did hear more remarkable.

## 2 Singalong, consensus and communication

Singalong had an enormous effect on any controversial content in the songs. The music hall repertoire had always included social and even political commentary. Before the war, suffragettes or the new National Insurance scheme were the theme for a number of songs, and during the war tanks, rationing, women's roles conscientious objection or conscription all figured in the

repertoire, as did wishing for the end of the war, patriotic appeals for recruitment, or dreaming of a distant rural paradise in Ireland or Dixieland.

The singer needed the entire audience to sing along. If only half sang, the artiste might be out of a job. This imposed consensual content.

As Philip Tagg has pointed out, sing-along has a social meaning: it constitutes “a rather obvious aural icon of individuals sharing (supposedly or actually) a common cause, or identity, or set of values and beliefs.”<sup>2</sup>

So when, for a few months in 1914, recruitment songs were all the rage, it’s easy to see how powerful they could be. Rather than reading a speech in the newspaper by a politician or a bishop, one was bodily singing in unison with people like yourself, along to choruses like this one.

**CHORUS : Your King and Country needs you**

The experience is communal melodic and bodily. Its power is attested by the practice in many music halls of having a recruitment sergeant sign people up for the army on stage in the theatre (sometimes supported by music hall stars in a “five shillings for the first man to join the army here tonight.” mode)

Frequently the singalong chorus is being led by a performer who sound working class, has an identifiable working class London or regional accent, and a working class stage name “Harry, Florrie, Ernie, Billy, Jack, Daisy or Gertie”. But

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<sup>2</sup> Tagg, *Music's Meanings*, 451.

you will have noticed that in this case the singer is singing in a bourgeois voice, and in an operatic style, symbolizing above all respectability and class.

But since only consensual or ambiguous content can work in music hall, cheerful recruitment songs essentially disappeared after the first few months of the war. In the Greatest Hits collection for 1915 published by leading publishers Francis and Day there is not one recruitment song.

It is also the reason we don't see anti war songs on the British music hall stage. Although the Stop the War campaign became quite influential in 1916, it certainly never got to consensus level. But we do not, either, find songs about hating Germans.

Relations with the German people were excellent before the war, and it may well be that it was felt impossible to impose group singing of hatred for these erstwhile friends.

To illustrate consensus on another issue; in the years immediately leading up to the war, we do not find songs opposing votes for women (the battle for public opinion has been won), but we do find songs mocking the suffragettes as "too extreme", hysterical, unnatural etc.

### 3 The form of the singalong chorus

To look now briefly at the form of the singalong chorus. There are various ways the singalong chorus is used or not used in wartime music hall hits.

Quite frequently, the entire refrain is identical after each verse, and therefore is amenable to singing along. You have on your hand-out a series of examples, with the number of words in the chorus. Some of them are quite long. We are not sure how the audience learned the words. In Parisian café concerts, the lyric sheets were handed out, but not in British music hall. The popularity of pianos, of sheet music sales and of street singers may provide a partial answer.

Not all hit songs use a singalong chorus. Perhaps some artistes preferred not to and could hold the audience sufficiently without one. However, it may also be the case that some songs are not easy to propose for consensual singing. “The Military Representative”, a 1917 hit song which portrayed the military representative on conscription exemption committees as a narrow minded and pompous imbecile, comes to mind.



#### 4 The content of the singalong chorus

Let us now look at some more examples of the content of the chorus, in three categories: the playful, the consensual and the ambiguous.

a) The playful. A number of singalong choruses are playful, in particular tongue twisters.

Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers 1914, from 1914 is quite well-known, but is only one of many wartime successes such as the ones on your handout.

- Patty Proudly Packs for Privates Prepaid Paper Parcels 1915
- You Can't Get Many Pimples on a Pound of Pickled Pork 1914
- I Can't Do My Bally Bottom Button Up 1916

This category rose very much in popularity during the war. Is it too much to interpret this as a desire for escapism, a desire which has been noticed in other facts from wartime entertainment culture: by far the two most popular musical comedies of the war were "Chu Chin Chow", an Aladdin-style story set in far-off China, and "Maid of the Mountains" a story of bandits, Italian mountains

and love, with a happy ending. Wanting songs which help to escape was a natural popular desire.

b) The consensual

I have already spoke of the centrality of consensus in singalong music hall.

This is one of the reasons that three quarters of wartime music hall songs (and 83% of hits) were not about the war or about life in wartime.

One well –known hit which rose up as the recruitment songs disappeared in “Are we downhearted: No!” which spoke a consensus of determination without glory. Morale is precarious, which is why it is necessary to repeat that the nation is not demoralized. We are light years away from the jingoistic songs of the nineteenth century (such as “we carved our way to glory”).

The song “Keep the Home fires burning” is typical of the consensual songs in the second half of the war. People had widely varying experiences of the war, and varying opinions, but a consensus around hoping for the end of the war was a safe subject for singalong. In both 1918 and 1919, for every song with the word “victory” in the title, there were ten songs with the word “home” in the title : this is where the consensus lay.

## 5 Dealing in ambiguities

Occasionally singalong choruses could use ambiguity: everyone singing for their own reasons. One of the songs which helped the war drive was “The Conscientious Objector’s Lament”. The narrator is presented as a cowardly, effeminate, probably homosexual intellectual refusing to fight. Listening to the mocking of this national enemy within must have been very powerful. And yet that is not the only pleasure afforded the audience. In the chorus, they are invited to become the narrator, to put themselves in the role of the pacifist and enjoy being transgressively anti war, singing:

“Send out the army and the navy  
 Send out the rank and file  
 Send out the brave old territorials  
 They’ll face the danger with a smile!  
 Send out the boys of the old brigade  
 Who made old England free  
 Send out my brother my sister or my mother  
 But for Gawd’s sake don’t send me!”

The silently ambiguous nature of the refrain is underlined by changes made to it in the last repetition, after the final verse where instead of “send out my brother, my sister or my mother” many singers sang “send out the bakers, and the bleedin profit makers”, showing a distrust in the prevalent discourses of national unity

Other songs gave double messages by the songwriter choosing carefully which sentiments to express in the verse and which in the chorus. The anti-Semitic hit song “Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein” from 1916 brings together a desire to show that the whole nation, including Jews is united in the war effort, with a celebration of racist stereotyping. The verses show the Jewish soldier setting up a usurious pawn shop in the trenches “with interest set at ninety percent”, and almost being killed by foolishly trying to make the three ball pawnshop sign out of unexploded shells. The Jewish man is shown as loving gold etc etc.

But if anti-Semitism was rife, it may not have been consensual enough for the singalong chorus. The chorus remains at the level of the ambiguous:

“Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein  
 He’s the pet of the fighting line  
 Oy Oy Oy, give three hearty cheers  
 For the only Jewish Scotsman in the Irish  
 fusiliers”

The harsh racist stereotypes are kept out of the consensual chorus.

There are far too many choruses and uses of choruses to discuss in one short paper, but I want to finish with one more, quite well-known piece “Goodbye”. Because it is important to remember that when one joins in a singalong, one pretends to become the narrator not just in his point of view, but also in his means of expression, his felt emotion. The chorus of the song Goodbye, from 1917 (sung by at least five different artistes including Florrie Forde; Harry Tate; Charles Whittle and Daisy Wood) is the example I want to look at.

Good Bye! Good Bye!  
 Wipe the tear, baby dear, from your eye  
 Tho' it's hard to part, I know,  
 I'll be tickled to death to go.  
 Don't cryee! don't sighee!  
 There's a silver lining in the skyee  
 Bonsoir, old thing! cheerio! chin-chin!  
 Nah poo! Toodleoo! Goodbye!

It is not easy to analyse this song, with the terrible repetition of a deformed ‘Goodbye’ (pronounced in baby talk, I think), the jaunty melody, jokey references to death and forced rhymes. One has the impression of a pain which cannot be described, where farce is the only option for emotional survival. He uses upper-class slang and is being mocked, yet the audience is singing along this

chorus and revisiting, in comic and desensitized tone, the many terrifying Goodbyes they have each had to live through. It seems to me not an accident that this is a hit in 1917, not in 1914.

Goodbye

## 6 Conclusion: studying singalong

So singalong helped and constrained the artistes, shaped the musical experience of the audience, and determined the range of subjects, in wartime or in peacetime, that could be dealt with in song.

It was also, of course, tremendous fun, part of that “Sweet Saturday Night” which Colin MacCinnes aims at describing in his book on music hall, and that the 1970s television show *Good Old Days*

tries to recreate (in an outrageous classless caricature).

And singalong was a marker of working class culture. The thousands of “penny concerts” around the country organized by local councils in the hope of “bettering” the working classes with classical music, were characterized by dressing up (working class musicians dressed up as bourgeois), and reflexive listening rather than participation was the rule of their game. Singalong was working class. There were some attempts by theatre managers, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as part of the obsessive drive of the music hall industry for respectability, to curb the practice of singalong. This gave rise to songs such as “Don’t sing the chorus” sung in 1911 by Vesta Victoria and other stars. In this ironic song the narrator insists that the theatre management has decided to ban singalong, and that if the audience did sing, she would lose her job.<sup>3</sup> Getting the working class parts of the hall to sing along, the manager had explained, would “upset my stalls and my boxes”. This attempt to curb singalong seems to have been abandoned by the time of the war.

I’ll have to stop there, but I am hoping to develop the analysis of singalong and its uses over the next year or so, so I’m very interested in your questions and comments.

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<sup>3</sup> Booth and Kaplan p71